

# Local 371's HA Workers Angry Over Chance of Privatizing Service Centers

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, May 18, 2015 5:00 pm

Floyd Cohen has worked at the Frederick Douglass Houses Senior Center in upper Manhattan for 14 of his 37 years with the Housing Authority. He said some of the patrons—whose artwork has appeared at the New York Aquarium, a hostel chain and in Asia—have enjoyed honing their talents with the encouragement of veteran employees.

“A lot of them, unfortunately, have had illnesses such as strokes, are cancer victims and it gives them a reason to live,” he said. “It gives them something to look forward to.”

## Protest Possible Farmouts

He was one of about 75 members of Social Service Employees Union Local 371 of District Council 37 who, with at least eight City Council Members, chided Mayor de Blasio May 12 for proposing a rearrangement of community and senior centers they said could lead to outsourcing of up to 100 unionized jobs.

The Mayor's budget proposal, introduced two weeks ago, includes a plan to hand control of the hubs from the HA to the Department of Youth and Community Development and the Department for the Aging, which already manage a substantial portion of the centers located among the 328 HA developments. Doing so would remove a \$22.4-million obligation from the agency's bottom line, Mr. de Blasio said.

The latest plan is part of an initiative by the Mayor to lighten the financial burdens for the beleaguered HA. The budget proposal, which is the subject of negotiations with the City Council, would forgive \$33 million in annual fees it pays the city in lieu of taxes and \$72.4 million it would have owed the NYPD for police services. The state contributed \$100 million in its budget, passed last month, and the Federal Government has kicked in billions of dollars to repair damage done by Hurricane Sandy.



## NEW MAYOR, SAME OLD PRIVATIZING?

NEW MAYOR, SAME OLD PRIVATIZING?: Anthony Wells, president of Local 371 of District Council 37, questioned Mayor de Blasio's decision to shift control of Housing Authority community and senior centers to other city agencies, which he and his HA members believe could be a prelude to privatizing the service. Referring to the practice of doing such outsourcing under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Mr. Wells declared, ‘I thought that day ended Dec. 31, 2013 and there was a new vision.’

The centers face less of an existential threat than last year, when a \$17-million gap in the initial budget proposal threatened the existence of 57 facilities; the money was later restored to keep them running.

### **More Than 1,400 Served**

If the administration proceeds with the plan, "Aging" would take on 17 more centers atop its 74 existing senior centers and DYCD would take on an unspecified number of HA-run facilities. They serve more than 600 kids and 825 seniors each day, according to a release distributed by Ritchie Torres, the Chair of the City Council's Public Housing Committee.

Local 371 and Mr. Torres said that once the centers change hands, they are very likely to be run by non-profits or other organizations that would lack the "enduring presence" that city workers offer.

"Social services are best provided, not by private contractors, but by a municipal labor force deeply rooted in the public-housing community," Mr. Torres said. He added that community centers reduce street crime and the temptation of gangs and that senior centers give second homes to the elderly.

In an April report, the business-backed Citizens Budget Commission recommended that the HA transfer control of the centers to other city agencies, which it said could save \$18.6 annually. A consultant's report said in 2012 the HA's centers spent 37 percent of operational funds on overhead versus 15 percent at "best-in-class" organizations.

"Decades of Federal and state disinvestment coupled with aging buildings have left NYCHA in a dire financial situation," said HA spokeswoman Jean Weinberg. "Partnering with city agencies and nonprofits to maintain these services for NYCHA seniors and youth will allow the Authority to focus on our core work of maintaining and preserving safe, clean, and connected communities."

But Mr. Torres said workers shouldn't bear the burden for the disinvestment.

"You cannot put a price tag on the institutional memory that Local 371 brings to the public-housing community," he said. "And so I would be careful not to reduce it to purely dollars and cents... There's no question NYCHA faces real fiscal challenges, but the notion of blaming municipal workers for NYCHA's challenges is an absurdity."

Anthony Wells, the president of Local 371, said the move could threaten jobs as well as the quality of life for residents, 15,000 of whom are city workers.

### **'Keep Commitment Here'**

"Isn't it ironic that we're here again talking about services that affect our most vulnerable: our seniors and our young people," he said. "That commitment must remain in NYCHA."

Mr. Wells said the move also signaled a willingness to continue privatizing social services even under Mr. de Blasio, who has a better relationship with organized labor than his predecessor,

Michael Bloomberg.

“I heard somewhere that city employees don’t do it as well as anyone else,” Mr. Wells said. “But I thought that day ended Dec. 31, 2013 and there was a new vision. And we’re saying to you, Mr. Mayor: complete your vision.”

DC 37 Executive Director Henry Garrido and heads of other locals attended the rally. Some Council Members, such as Andy King and Inez Barron, questioned the Mayor’s progressive credentials.

“To our Mayor: It’s time to support and take care of the people who voted for you and not for the people who paid for you,” said Mr. King, a former Caseworker and member of Local 371.